

THE GENESIS OF MACAULAY'S HISTORY

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Croker urging him to write an article upon it —and an unfavourable article too. ' If you could do it pure justice/ he said, ' nothing more is wanted to give the author sufficient pain/ At the same time he added that the History would always [£] keep a high place among the specimens of English rhetoric ', and confessed, ' I read the book with breathless interest, in spite of occasional indignations/ ' I

Professional historians, equally sensible of the defects of Macaulay's method and the errors his book contained, have been more emphatic and more generous in their recognition of his achievement. Take for instance Lord Acton—no one was more revolted by the injustice and the prejudice which marked certain portions of Macaulay's History, and yet no one admired it more. ' He remains to me/ Acton admitted to Mary Gladstone, ' one of the greatest of all writers and masters, although I think him utterly base, contemptible and odious for certain reasons/ Nobody could say after this that Acton was blind to Macaulay's defects, but to him the possession by Macaulay and the exhibition in his History of certain technical merits of surpassing greatness seemed to compensate, and more than compensate, for those defects. In another letter to the same correspondent, Acton said :

When you sit down to read Macaulay, remember that the Essays are really flashy and superficial. He was not above par in literary criticism ; his Indian articles will not hold water ; and his two most famous reviews, on Bacon and Ranke, show his incompetence. The essays are only pleasant reading, and a key to half the prejudices of our age. It is the History (with one or two speeches) that is wonderful. He knew nothing respectably before the

¹ Croker Papers, ed. L. J. Jennings (1885), iii. 194-5. Lockhart to Croker, Jan. 12, 1849.